

ROSH HASHANAH I
5778

The world renowned scholar and our teacher Alfred E. Newman said: “These days, the only time politicians tell the truth is when they call each other a liar.” For you golfers, Bob Bruce shares: “I used to play golf with a guy who cheated so badly that he once had a hole in one and wrote down zero on his scorecard.”

I find it concerning that the attention paid to dishonesty in sports seems greater than dishonesty elsewhere in our society. Whether it is the Chicago Black Sox of 1919 or Pete Rose, Lance Armstrong and Deflate Gate, there should be at least equal concern over dishonesty wherever it exists. Cheating in school and plagiarizing off the internet is rampant, but concern among students and even parents is not. The message many of our youth are receiving is that it is alright to do whatever you need to do to get ahead and get accepted into a good college.

We are becoming a society of alt-truths and alt-facts designed to serve personal and political agendas. Too many Americans do not care or care enough. The Jewish people, however, have valued truth for over 3000 years. Our rabbis said that the seal of God is truth. Two thousand years ago Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught (Avot 1:18) that truth is one of the three pillars supporting all of life. The other two are justice and peace. Seeing that there can be no peace without justice and there can be no justice without truth, truth is the lynch pin; without it all unravels. There can be no trust if there is no truth—truth in our government, courtrooms, media, relationships and truth within ourselves.

Our Torah is a book of truth teaching us by acknowledging how we as human beings are inclined to lie and be dishonest. Pharaoh lies when he tells Moses to stop the plagues and he will let our people go. Jacob deceives his father and cheats his brother and Joseph’s brothers lie to Jacob after selling Joseph into slavery. How much lying comes from our elected and appointed officials and police and from witnesses testifying in courtrooms and before Congress? The Hebrew for truth, *emet*, is made up of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet indicating that truth is the beginning, the end and everything in between. Think of the harm done to the Jewish people because of lies. How many Jews suffered and died because we were accused of killing Jesus, using the blood of Christian children to make matzo and causing the Black Plague? How many lies did the Nazis tell about us and how many suffered and died because of these lies?

What is the truth as to why there is so much violence and so many guns in our country? What is the truth about our ability and responsibility to provide quality health care for every person in our country? What is the truth as to why in the wealthiest country in human history millions of children go to school every day and to sleep every night hungry? What is the truth as to why the infant mortality rate in the United States is so high? What is the truth about clean energy, climate change and global warming? What will it take for those in power finally to acknowledge the truth? What more needs to happen and how many more scientific facts need to be presented? To deny facts in Judaism is as serious a violation as committing perjury in the courtroom. What is the truth about the cost of prescription drugs and the opiod epidemic? What is the truth about the suicide rate in our country not only but especially among teenagers, soldiers and veterans? What is the truth as to the rise in hate crimes in our country including anti-Semitism and the truth about our own fear of immigrants, refugees, gay and trans people? What is the historical truth about slavery and its consequences and about those who defended it and fought for it to continue? What is the truth about what we did and continue to do to American Indians? Today textbooks in many school systems minimize and distort these histories—these facts, these truths. How

do we feel about Holocaust deniers and when the history of the Holocaust is not taught as it should be and needs to be in every school? What is the truth about our own racism, xenophobia and prejudices? What is the truth about our relationship as American Jews to Israel and the truth about having respectful discussion and debate about Israel? If we cannot be truthful on Rosh HaShanah, when will we be?

How much nonsense do people accept as religious truth that results in discrimination and oppression? Untruths are untruths whether it is superstitions that create fear and anxiety or that God will eternally dam someone to hell who doesn't believe a certain way. Whether it is that God does not want women to count in a minyan or be able to pray with tallit and tefilin at the Kotel. Whether it is that the Universe is only 6000 years old or that God regards Reform and Conservative Judaism as desecrations and illegitimate. Or, whether it is that God wants us to fly airplanes into skyscrapers, blow up Planned Parenthood facilities and burn down Palestinian homes with families inside. Voltaire knew hundreds of years ago that those who can make us believe in absurdities can make us commit atrocities. Nothing good ever comes out of nonsense and lies; not in religion, in the courtroom, in our business dealings and not in our marriages, family and personal relationships.

Our rabbis tell us that it is absurd to think that we can do an accounting of our souls—*cheshbon hanefesh*—if we are not honest about ourselves. We cannot do *teshuvah*—returning to the right path and repenting—if we are not honest. How can we ever ask for forgiveness if we are not honest about what we did or failed to do? Looking directly and honestly into the mirror is absolutely necessary. Why is this so hard? Because it demands truth about ourselves and this is difficult and painful. Perhaps this is why so many of us find some comfort in alt-truths and alt-facts; it allows us to engage in them as well. In our Torah (Leviticus 25:17) we are told we cannot oppress another person. Our rabbis say being dishonest with someone including ourselves is oppression. The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) tells us that the first question we will be asked in the Heavenly Court is whether we have dealt honestly with others and with ourselves? Have we been honest in our marriages, our friendships, with our money and with our words. How honest are we? How honest will be in the year ahead?

To be honest requires being sincere. What comes out of our mouths must be what is in our hearts. How many of us say things we do not mean? I certainly do. We lie because we are afraid, to advance ourselves, to hurt others, to create false images of ourselves, to take advantage of others and we lie to get what we want. How many lies do we tell, how many lies do we hear? Lying is lying whether we are Tevye the milkman, the rabbi or the president of the United States. Rabbi Louis Jacobs taught that we are not permitted to deceive ourselves. Being honest with ourselves comes from being honest with others. When we give honesty we may not always receive honesty but we can look in the mirror. When we give lies it is impossible to look in the mirror. Lying becomes easier the more one does it and as Goebbels said, *yimach shemo*: "If we tell a lie often enough it will be believed and the bigger the lie the more it will be believed." This is true today as it was in Nazi Germany. There are many conspiracy theories including that the Israelis orchestrated the attacks on 9/11 and there are many who believe them. What do we believe that is not true?

One of the most tragic lies of our lives is that who we are as imperfect people is the best we can be. It is not true that we cannot improve and be better; this is a lie. Saints and sages are not perfect people but are people who are honest about themselves. Every one of us can do this; this is a truth. The truth is that there is hope if we can deal with the lies we tell, the deceptions we practice and the infidelities we practice. The Psalmist (Psalm 119:121) tells us to speak the truth in our hearts which means to be true to ourselves. It means that if we make a promise to ourselves, for example, to begin exercising, quit

smoking, begin taking classes, spend more time with family, apologize to someone, have more Shabbos in our lives, do more tzedakah, we must keep these. We need to be honest about our emotions and allow ourselves to acknowledge when we are sad, hurt or afraid. Pretending to be alright is not honest. When we are in mourning, let us mourn and grieve; it is honest and truthful. When we do wrong, let us feel the sting of conscience and genuinely ask for forgiveness. When someone genuinely asks us for forgiveness, let us forgive. Forgiveness is part of truth because the truth is every human being needs forgiveness. Forgiveness is goodness, goodness is light and light is truth.

There are over one hundred commandments dealing with honesty in our business dealings—more than dealing with the kashrut of our food. A Midrash (Mekhilta) teaches that one who is honest in business fulfills the entire Torah. It is hard to believe that after over 3000 years of Judaism's commitment to truth and honesty that the Rubashkin Agriprocessor kosher meat packing shonda and the Madoff Ponzi scheme could happen. Kosher is kosher and kosher is truth. Anything not honest is treif. What about corporate corruption, tax evasion by companies and wealthy people, the violation of laws as to worker safety and the environment? Our rabbis knew that greed and money are the source of much lying and illegal behavior. How much suffering is caused by dishonesty and fraudulent behavior in the business and financial world? How honest are we in our personal business transactions, treatment of employees and our dealing with money? How much do money and greed determine positions and policies on climate change and global warming? How often do dishonesty and lies involving money and property break up families and friendships?

In the Talmud (Makkot 24a) we are told of Rav, a 3rd century Babylonian rabbi, was praying. A businessman approached him and offered Rav a price for a certain item Rav had up for sale. Rav, in his mind, accepted the price but could not tell the man this since he was davening. Therefore, the man thought Rav was rejecting his price and kept raising his offer. When Rav finished praying he told the man that he accepted the first offer because he determined in his mind that was the right and fair price. In our culture Rav would be considered a fool; in Jewish context Rav is praised for being righteous, a tzaddik. Rabbi Meir Tamari asks: "Do we teach our children to be honest or to be clever, to be truthful or to look out for themselves, to be sincere or to say what you must to get what you want?"

Yom Kippur begins with Kol Nidrei which is a legal formulation asking us to be released from our unfulfilled vows and hoping in the year ahead we will not make vows or promises that we will not fulfill. Kol Nidrei is an acknowledgment that as human beings we are not perfect. Kol Nidrei challenges us to examine the genuineness of our promises and vows and to be honest as to our intentions when making them. Do we really intend to fulfill them? Kol Nidrei reminds us to speak truthfully and to use our gift of speech honestly. In Judaism, our speech is the same as our actions. Our word, as our handshake, needs to be good; it needs to be true and trustworthy. Lies and dishonesty tarnish the image of G-d in which each of us is created.

Truth is the seal of God. Truth is one of the three pillars maintaining all of life. Honesty and integrity cannot be restricted to saints and holy people but must become the norm for all of us. We certainly are able to honestly confront and reject alt-truths and alt-facts; as Jews we must because being truthful is a mitzvah. We must reject lies when they are before us and demand truth and honesty from our elected officials, judges, police, from family, friends and ourselves. A person who reveres God is almost exclusively described in our tradition as one who is far removed from falsehood and dishonesty. Our prophets ascribe the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple to rampant fraud and dishonesty.

There is a Talmudic legend that tells us of a community that was immortal, where no one died. The reason this community was so blessed was because no one ever lied. Let us be as honest and truthful as possible knowing that no one can be perfect. Let what is true be in our hearts and souls and be what comes out of our mouths to our spouses, families, friends and to all with whom we speak. Let it be a lie if anyone says that we are liars. Let it be a lie if anyone says that our children are liars. Let it be said about us and our children that we are honest and truthful. Let our handshake and our word be good. Let the seal of G-d which is the seal of truth be upon us for all to see. Let us be thankful that we are of a people dedicated to truth which is light and we are a people commanded to be a light unto the nations.

SHANAH TOVAH.